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## Chapter 1

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*c. 1929*

"**Y**ou realize, of course, that this will be a marriage in name only?" he asked, putting a glass of something down on the coffee table in front of her that she sincerely hoped, given the tenor and subject of the very awkward discussion they were having, was liquor.

She hadn't necessarily confronted that idea, although she'd certainly hoped that would be the case. She hoped she'd managed not to reveal that fact, but it was hard to tell. He always looked so intently at her that she was quite sure he could discern every thought she'd ever had in her life. But then, he was a serious, intent man, and he looked at everyone that way, and why would he bother to try to do anything like that with her?

She really was nothing and no one to him—except, perhaps, depending on how this went, his next wife.

"A marriage of convenience, if you will?" he elaborated, taking the chair diagonally to her right, a mere three or so feet away from her.

It didn't really matter to Mina how far away from her he was.

He always set her on edge, not by anything he'd ever done to her, but simply because of how he was.

Radames Royal Peyton was a powerful, potent man, in more than one way, she was sure. That thought made her thankful for the relatively dim light of the room that served as his home office, assuming it would afford her some protection from that piercing gaze as she could feel an unwanted blush staining her throat and cheeks.

"I took your meaning the first time, Mr. Peyton," she murmured as she sipped the gold liquid, noting that he'd given her roughly half of the amount he'd taken for himself. At that moment, she was feeling so shy and insecure, she might well have reached out and downed his as well as hers, but she managed to control her nervousness and merely wet her lips with the buttery, caramel flavored liquor.

She was going to need to keep every wit she owned about her if she was going to make it through this conversation and achieve her preferred outcome.

If only she knew exactly what that was.

She did know that the idea of marrying him had just become a million times more palatable to her with just that question.

"Good. As long as you understand that, I'm sure we'll get along famously." Frankly, he took it as a very good sign that she was still here, even after he'd made what he knew most women would find to be an outrageous proposal.

Mina raised an eyebrow sardonically at that, stopping herself from making a sarcastic comment about how "famously" they'd gotten along during the relatively short time they'd known each other, especially considering the sometimes condition of the very backside on which she was currently—and nervously—perched.

In truth, his suggestion had bowled her over, especially since he hadn't seemed to like her very much from the start. They'd met after she'd traveled all the way down to New Mexico from New England for her best friend—his sister's—engagement party,

approximately three months ago. The party was at the beginning of the summer, with the wedding near the end, and she was going to stay the entire time, returning the day after the wedding, which was about two weeks before school started again.

Mina had thought from the moment she'd met his eyes as she'd shaken that enormous paw he'd offered to her with obvious reluctance, and only after she'd extended hers—that he didn't think much of her. And throughout her stay at the family's large ranch style home, she'd done her level best to spend as little time with him as possible.

The fact that he always seemed to be busy with work that either involved the ranch itself or business obligations in the city meant that it wasn't always hard to accomplish.

She'd arrived the week before the party to lend a hand to Crystal, the bride-to-be, intent on turning her hand to whatever needed to be done to try to take some of the pressure off her.

Not only was her taller, skinnier, more beautiful, and decidedly wealthier friend trying to plan the large party—and her even larger society wedding—but she was also quite busy doing her best to play mother to her two little nieces at the same time, as well as running the large household overall. When the tragedy happened several years ago, as any good sister would, Crystal—who had been living in the small house that served as guest quarters on the ranch—had stepped up and moved back into the big house to help take care of her little nieces. Radames did what he could when he was home, but his work took him away on business relatively frequently.

Mina knew that the girls' mother had died in a car accident. Crystal had told her there was more to that story not long after it happened, suggesting that she wouldn't mind spilling more about it at some point, but she had never volunteered the details again, and Mina had not asked—no matter how curious she was. It was no secret between the two friends that Crys hated her sister-in-law and considered her to be an out and out gold digger.

It wasn't until one night not long after she'd gotten there, when the two of them had had entirely too much to drink, that she became desperate enough to ask about the real story.

The girls had already been put to bed, and the two of them had a great meal of the Circle P's own steak, marinated in garlic and spices, twice baked potatoes, and roasted carrots and peppers, along with enormous slabs of homemade apple pie and ice cream. The two women rolled out onto the patio and ensconced themselves on the cushioned wrought-iron lounge chairs that afforded them a gorgeous view of the starkly beautiful, vast desert that stretched out seemingly forever behind the house. While her brother had disappeared—as was his habit, apparently—into his office, Crystal had scarfed the bottle of wine from the meal and brought it, along with their glasses, with her. It wasn't long before, despite the amount of food they had consumed, the both of them were three sheets to the wind.

"So, what do you think of my brother? Gorgeous, isn't he?" Crystal asked expansively.

Mina chuckled. "Well..."

"Come on. I hope you know that you don't have to play coy with me. He's right up your alley."

Damn her big mouth for having told her friend what physical characteristics she preferred in a man, especially since her brother ticked off every single one of them, which she then proceeded to enumerate.

"He's tall, he's broad—and that ain't no lie—he's got muscles on his muscles. He's got black hair, a chiseled jawline. Isn't that exactly how you once described your dream man to me?"

"Once" was the key word there. That had been very early on in their acquaintance, when they were freshmen in college together, and she definitely didn't still have an ideal of a "dream man" or even "dream man description." She no longer dated and was no longer interested in having any kind of a relationship with a man, not that her somewhat self-absorbed friend had ever

noticed those facts, or if she had, she had never commented to her about it.

She had stopped dating abruptly in the middle of their senior year and had never resumed it.

No one had ever asked her why, and Mina was incredibly thankful that no one had, since she didn't like to lie, and a lie was the only response she would have been willing to give to that question.

Sometimes having your best friend be a little selfish and self-involved was a good thing.

"Yes, it was," she replied in a neutral tone.

"He's a straight shooter, too. Honest as the day is long, trustworthy."

The more her friend continued to list her brother's good points—as she was trying to sell him to her, which was patently ridiculous in so many ways—the more time Mina spent wishing she could think of a suitable topic to which she could change the subject. So she asked the first question that popped into her mind, and what she asked was a testimony to just how far gone she was. "You never did tell me what happened the night your brother's wife died."

At first, and for an abnormally long time, there was silence from the lounge next to her, and Mina began to wonder if she'd managed to offend her friend.

But then Crys sat up, took a large gulp of her wine, and locked her bleary eyes with her friend's equally unfocused ones.

"That's right. I never did tell you that, did I?"

The other woman, in her inevitably meandering way, told her the whole, sordid story.

"Well, I think you know that Rad and Lisa had a tumultuous relationship, to say the least. Tumultuous on Lisa's end, anyway. Rad almost never yells."

"Really? He looks like the kind of guy who yells all the time," she confessed with a small shudder that Crystal missed entirely.

"Oh, no. Not at all. He doesn't have to yell. All he has to do is give you that look." She tried hard to duplicate it but failed miserably, not having the personality and being much too booze-soaked to back it up.

In fact, Mina was sniggering at her from behind her hand, which got her a glare.

"Well, if he ever looked at you that way, you wouldn't be laughing."

Mina was quite sure she was right. As it was, after having met him—formally—for the first time after hearing about him since the girls had met, she had already recognized the fact that she would need to make herself scarce when he was around. He was... unsettling to her in the extreme, not that she was going to admit that to his sister, who she suspected would do the worst thing possible and tell him she thought that. Mina would have been so embarrassed that she would have had to melt into a hole somewhere in the depths of the desert.

Crys lay back on the lounge again, looking surprisingly pensive for how inebriated Mina knew she was.

"You knew it was a car accident, though, right?"

"Yes. You called me that night, remember?"

"Vaguely," she confessed. "Well, they had had a big fight at the house that was almost worse because she was the only one doing the screaming. But then, she was drunk—again, still. She'd started drinking more than usual after Hope was born, but she really dedicated herself to it after she had Janie." Crys leaned over to stage whisper to Mina, while cupping her hand near her mouth, "I don't think she wanted either kid—not really. She was always going on about how they ruined her figure, even though I never saw any evidence of that fact. She snapped back from each birth as if she'd never gone through it at all. I've been more of a mother to those kids than she ever was, and they're not even mine. It was that way from the beginning, frankly." She took another healthy swig of wine. "Like I said, they had a big fight

and she ran down the hall and locked herself in her room. They had separate rooms, much to Rad's disgust," she whispered. "I only know that she'd done that because she screamed it at him at the top of her lungs. The people on the next ranch knew that she was locking her door to him, for crying out loud. But she didn't stay there very long. We didn't know that, because we were here, on the patio. We didn't know that she'd slipped out until we heard the little roadster he'd gotten her as a wedding present roaring down the driveway."

She stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray on the table between them. "I have to give it to Rad—even though she made him crazy, and there was no way he could catch her, he still ran out of the house and after her. It was a waste of energy, though. There was no way he could catch her. I'm surprised he even tried. She'd made it abundantly clear that she wanted out, real bad, apparently.

"Anyway, Rad got the call about the accident in the middle of that same night. I went with him to the hospital in Albuquerque, where they'd brought them."

Mina looked surprised, and she couldn't stop herself from asking, "Them?"

Crystal nodded as she sank slowly back into the cushions. "Yeah, them. She had taken off with Bobby Juiffre, with whom she'd apparently been having an affair that had lasted at least a year, if not more. Long enough that I know he can't be absolutely sure that Janie is really his—except that she's definitely got his stubborn streak and his black hair. Bobby is a redhead," she explained. "I don't think Rad cared much how long it had been going on. I'm not even sure he cared that it had been going on—only that everyone who didn't already know about it was going to know about it, because this is a small town."

"Oh, dear."

"Damn straight 'oh, dear'." She sounded far away when she continued, "I'd never seen the look I saw on Rad's face that night

when they told him that they were together, and I've never seen it again. I don't ever want to see it again." Crystal shivered just remembering it.

Mina was glad to see that she wasn't the only one who sometimes had that reaction to her brother.

"I'm sorry to hear about that. It must've been horrible for him."

"It was, but he's pretty stoic, you know? I was surprised when they got married, but not all that surprised when he ended up widowed, although my money was on divorced. If I'm going to be completely honest, I thought she was so unhappy that it was likely that she was going to up and leave him at some point. She hated this place with a passion."

Her friend frowned. "How can anyone hate this place? It's not the mountains or rolling green hills of New England, except for the Sandias, and Lord knows it's miles and miles of miles and miles, but it's beautiful in its own way."

Crys gave her a lopsided smile. "I knew you'd feel that way about it."

"Being a school librarian, I can't afford to travel to too many places, but I've loved everywhere I've been, so far."

"Yeah, that's you all right."

"You want me to complain? I can do that, you know. It's friggin' hot out here, to start with—"

Crystal held up her hand. "No, thank you for your kind offer, but I don't need you to turn into a Lisa. I've had it up to here with that."

"Even years later?"

"Yes. Definitely."

They were both quiet for a while.

"Well, I think I'm going to retire for the evening."

Mina didn't even need to look to know her friend was pouting as she got up. "So soon?"

"Yes. Unlike you, I'm an early riser."



"You don't have to be, you know. This is your summer vacation."

She took her glass with her as she headed to the sliding glass door on her way to the bedroom she was going to be using, but continued to look back at Crys as she was walking. "Not all of us like to sleep the day away—ah!"

Mina didn't expect to encounter a wall. She hadn't been there that long, but she'd looked to see that her way was clear before turning her head, and she'd still ended up crashing—hard enough to send her a step or two back—into something anyway.

Or, more accurately, someone.

And that someone reached out to agilely prevent her from falling, although as soon as she felt Rad's hands close—even as gently as they did—on her forearms, she immediately jumped as far away from him as she could, hugging her arms around her protectively.

"Are you all right?" he asked, and even she had to admit that he sounded quite solicitous. For his part, Rad was horrified by her reaction. He'd never deliberately hurt a woman in his life—he wouldn't ever do so. But she acted as if—instead of saving her from falling over backwards—he had attempted to break both her arms. He was big and strong, and more than well aware of those facts. He had long since learned how to temper both of those things to the situation. His sister called him a big pussycat—most of the time, anyway. He might have an overall relatively serious demeanor, and even look—and act sometimes, he admitted to himself—intimidatingly, but he thought he'd rarely displayed that part of his personality to a woman, certainly not to his sister's best friend, whom he barely knew.

"I'm fine, thank you," she answered quietly while avoiding his gaze, as if she hoped he wouldn't notice her any more than he absolutely had to. "Good night, Crys." Then, although it was obvious to everyone that she only said it because she thought she should, she murmured, "Good night, Mr. Peyton."

"Rad," he corrected softly, watching her skitter away from him as if she was an ant and he'd already drawn his foot up to stomp on her.

Even though she knew she was safe behind her locked bedroom door—relatively, anyway, since he probably had a key—Mina leaned back against it, trying to regain control of her rapid breathing.

She wasn't sure she was going to be able to stay here for the rest of the summer if he was going to be so present. It had been her understanding that Crys' brother was gone a lot, but maybe he was staying close to home more now because she was getting married.

Regardless, he was going to play hell with her stress levels and sense of security, but she hoped for her best friend—especially since she was the maid-of-honor—that she could stick it out through the summer, and then the wedding.

Mina fell back onto the bed in the way she would have fallen on the patio if he hadn't caught her, wondering how she was going to survive the next few months.

The problem with that was that he—Radames Royal Peyton—besides being the brother of the bride, was also the best man, so there was no getting away from him. He was already involved in the wedding and would be present every step of the way.